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ABSTRACT

"Questioning the Author" is a particular style of classroom discussion that tries to get young students (fourth and fifth graders) to actively grapple with the ideas they read about in class. It may be distinguished from other reading strategies by the following approaches: (1) it addresses a text as the product of a fallible author; (2) it takes place in the context of an initial reading rather than after that reading is finished; (3) it deals with a text through general probes for meaning directed toward making sense of ideas in the text; (4) it encourages collaboration in the construction of meaning. Observations were conducted in four classrooms in which "Questioning the Author" had been implemented. Student and teacher responses were charted according to the extent to which they attempted to construct meaning (as opposed to repeating information). Results were compared with observations in baseline classrooms; they showed that while in baseline classrooms most student comments were verbatim repetitions of the text, nearly half of the comments in the "Questioning the Author" classrooms were directed toward the construction of meaning. Further, teachers in the "Questioning the Author" classrooms were closely tailoring their rejoinders to individual student comments. They were working a lot harder than teachers in the baseline classrooms because their comments were designed to move discussion forward. Contains two references. (TB)

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Getting Inside Meaningful Classroom Discourse

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Getting Inside Meaningful Classroom Discourse

The meaningful classroom discourse to be discussed takes place in the context of an environment called Questioning the Author (McKeown, Beck, & Worthy, 1993). Questioning the Author is a way to get young students--4th and 5th graders--to actively grapple with the ideas they read about in their school books. And *this* doesn't make Q the A unique--many researchers are working on the problem of getting readers to more actively engage in their reading, such as with discussion groups and strategy instruction. But in Questioning the Author we have a constellation of features that does makes the approach unique:

(**a**) It addresses text as the product of a fallible author. Questioning the Author is introduced by telling students that what's written in their textbooks is just someone's ideas written down, that sometimes what's written is clear, but sometimes it's not, and that often a reader needs to work to understand what an author is trying to say. We want students to understand good reading as necessarily effortful and active, to motivate them to dig into the text rather than disengage, which is what so often happens when young readers don't understand something immediately.

(**b**) it takes place in the context of reading as it initially occurs--not after reading, as in most discussion formats. Most reading is done aloud, with the entire class, and reading is stopped along the way as ideas are considered; in this way, the process of constructing meaning itself is affected.

(**c**) it deals with text through general probes for meaning directed toward making sense of ideas in the text. When reading is stopped, the teacher poses questions--we call them Queries--like "What's the author trying to say?" "What's this all about?" and follow-ups like "What do you think the author means by that?" "How does that connect with what the author told us before?" "Why do you think the author wants us to know that?"

(**d**) it encourages collaboration in the construction of meaning. The class works on considering the ideas in a text together, building on what each other has to say.

Over the past two years, Questioning the Author has been implemented in five teachers, classrooms. The teachers' use of Questioning the Author brought about substantial changes in classroom interactions about text (Beck, McKeown, Worthy, Sandora, & Kucan, 1994). We found that the questions that teachers used no longer focused on having students retrieve information from the text, as was strongly the case in the teachers' baseline lessons. Questions under Questioning the Author focused instead on constructing the meaning of ideas that were read. Another change was that the proportion of talk shifted so that the students were taking a greater role in classroom lessons.

These kinds of changes transformed classroom discourse from the traditional pattern of isolated teacher questions followed by brief student responses and teacher evaluations to cycles of querying, building, and elaborating text ideas.

Given the framework of different teacher questions and greater student involvement, a focus for examination became the "interior" of the discourse pattern that emerged in the classrooms: what kind of student responses did teacher questions draw forth and how did the teachers use those responses to help move and develop discussion?

<u>Student Responses</u>

Our observations of the classrooms and reading of the videotape transcripts indicated that students' contributions to the discussion of text was changing quite dramatically. Not only were the comments obviously longer than in traditional lessons, but the ideas expressed seemed more complex and the focus was much more on meaning than on literal wording.

To examine these changes systematically, we developed a categorization scheme to describe the responses students gave during discussions. Four categories were developed that encompassed the kinds of student responses found in the lessons:

One category involved responses that were verbatim or near verbatim text. Both the concepts and the language of these responses stayed close to the text.

A second category was construction of local meaning. These responses represented students' attempts to manipulate text ideas, explaining them and recasting them in their own language and sometimes including simple elaborations. These responses stayed fairly close to the text in concept, although the language was transformed, and movement toward meaning was evident.

An example would be responding to the text sentence, "Reindeer herders depended on reindeer to fill all their needs," by saying, "They're hunters that go out and that depend on reindeer for their food and their fur and places to live." Some transformation occurs--for example, the instantiation of *needs* as *food, fur, places to live.*

A third category of response was integration. These responses represented dealing with text ideas or ideas in the discussion by integrating prior knowledge or previously learned text information, hypothesizing solutions to conflicts or problems that arose from the reading, or extrapolating consequences of text events and ideas.

An example would be responding to the concept of reindeer herders by comparing their lifestyle to that of a group of people that the class had read about earlier: "The people who we learned about, Eskimos, they do like that, but they make their houses and clothes and stuff out of, well, caribou." This student has integrated across two groups that were presented separately in the text.

The fourth category represented those responses in which students introduced their own questions or comments into the discussion and responses in which peers directly addressed those comments, either by answering a question, expressing agreement or disagreement, or adding to a comment made by a peer.

For example, a student responding to the discussion of reindeer herders by adding: "Like Shanelle said, I think they get their food and stuff out of the reindeer, but they don't go out and hunt them, because they raise them and just herd them together." This student expresses agreement with a peer but then clarifies a distinction between hunting and herding.

Teacher Rejoinders

From observations we noticed that in their rejoinders to student comments, teachers were no longer mainly evaluating the correctness of a student's response, but tending to use the responses to shape discussion and build meaning. To understand how teachers used student responses, we examined the ways in which teachers made student responses public, as that represents an important first step in using students' ideas as grist for discussion. We identified three ways in which teachers placed students' comments in the public arena.

The first was to repeat the comment nearly verbatim. For example, a student comments about sheep shearing by saying "There is no feeling in the hair," and the teacher says "Right, you have no feeling in the hair."

The second was to paraphrase the comments, changing the wording somewhat but without modifying the intended meaning. For example, the shearing conversation continues: "Unless you pull it--your roots are in your scalp," and The teacher rejoins: "Yeah. You're pulling at your scalp, your skin. And that's what hurts."

The third way was to refine the comment, shaping the ideas by in some cases clarifying what a student had said, or by focusing the comments in a particular direction, or lifting them to more general or more sophisticated language. An example comes from a discussion of names that American Indians have, in particular a character in the text is called Grandfather Laughter. A student comments: "Well, if you've ever

known the names of Indians, you'd know they don't have names like Nick or Brandon; they have like names of what they do. So, Grandfather Laughter, maybe he like amuses people on the reservation." And the teacher responds: "As Nick mentioned, for Indians many of their names tell about them; tell what's in their heart, tell about what's in their soul, about their dreams, what they want to be."

Results

Our analysis of student responses and teacher rejoinders involved the four teachers, two from the first year of implementation and two from the second year, for whom we have baseline lessons. We compared teachers' baseline lessons with a sample of lessons from Questioning the Author across the year of implementation. We examined the patterns of student responses and of rejoinders in the baseline and Questioning the Author lessons for each teacher with a separate chi-square analysis. First, for student responses, for each teacher's class the pattern was significantly different from baseline to Questioning the Author. And that difference was a move away from verbatim responses and in the direction of construction of meaning and integration. For baseline lessons, verbatim responses dominated, and there was hardly any integration and even fewer instances of students bringing in their own comments and responding to their peers. In the Questioning the Author lessons, the proportion of verbatim shrunk, approximately half the student responses were directed toward constructing meaning, a full quarter of them integrated ideas, and students were doing a lot more interacting with each other.

For the teacher rejoinders, three of the four teachers (that's four of five analyses, because one teacher taught both reading and social studies) had significant differences in the patterns of their rejoinders from baseline to Questioning the Author lessons. The fourth teacher did have some shift toward more refinement, but not significantly so. In general, teachers began responding to students by mostly repeating what the students had said. This was the largest category in baseline data for all teachers. Then with Questioning the Author, the types of rejoinders were much more spread across the three categories. Teachers were varying their responses much more, tailoring them to what the student had said and how that could fit into the discussion. This also meant the teachers were working a lot harder! They didn't just react by automatically repeating what was said, but they had to listen, make a decision, and then provide their own response.

Discussion

The interior view of classroom discourse under Questioning the Author shows that students' interactions became more oriented toward constructing meaning and integrating ideas rather than locating information in the text. The way that teachers dealt with student responses shifted toward using the responses to guide meaning building rather than simply broadcasting them for other students to hear--which is not unimportant, but which does not really help to shape the discussion.

Excerpts from Questioning the Author lessons to be presented illustrate how student responses and teacher rejoinders weave together to create an environment for grappling with text ideas. Placing student and teacher responses in their discourse context also gives insight into the complexity of the teacher's task in creating this kind of environment.

References

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